THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

MORAL TEACHING SERVES THE HUMAN PERSON

PREPARED BY THE ETHICISTS OF THE NCBC
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"The moral teachings that we profess here flow principally from the natural law, understood in the light of the revelation Christ has entrusted to his Church. From this source the Church has derived its understanding of the nature of the human person, of human acts, and of the goals that shape human activity."
— USCCB, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed. (2009), n. 38.

❖ SUMMARY ❖

Mistaken Understandings of Catholic Moral Teaching

- It is restrictive of human freedom.
- It is arbitrary and impedes the attainment of happiness.
- It is unscientific and positivistic in its dictates.
- By making appeals to revelation that cannot be known to reason, it is unreasonable.

The Truth of Catholic Teaching

The moral teachings of the Church exist for our own benefit.

- "God is offended by us only when we act against our own good." — St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* 3.122

- "Sin is an offense against reason, truth and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods." — *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1849

- "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves." — John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), introduction

- "[Galileo] declared explicitly that the two truths, of faith and of science, can never contradict each other, 'Sacred Scripture and the natural world proceeding equally from the divine Word, the first as dictated by the Holy Spirit, the second as a very faithful executor of the commands of God,' as he wrote in his letter to Father Benedetto Castelli on 21 December 1613. The Second Vatican Council says the same thing, even adopting similar language in its teaching: 'Methodical research, in all realms of knowledge, if it respects … moral norms, will never be genuinely opposed to faith: the reality of the world and of faith have their origin in the same God' (*Gaudium et spes*, 36). Galileo sensed in his scientific research the presence of the Creator who, stirring in the depths of his spirit, stimulated him, anticipating and assisting his intuitions." — John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (November 10, 1979), quoted in *Fides et ratio*, note 29.

Defending the dignity of the human person in health care and the life sciences since 1972

❖ FAQ ❖

Question 1. Do the bishops forbid some health care services from taking place in Catholic hospitals?

Reply: The only procedures Catholic hospitals do not perform would be those that violate the integrity of the patient. For example, in contemporary society, surgical sterilizations are often looked upon as a health service. However, such procedures neither cure nor prevent a disease, nor do they ameliorate the deleterious effects of an illness. They fundamentally destroy an otherwise healthy system of the body. It would be erroneous to refer to direct abortions, direct sterilizations, or physician-assisted suicide—none of which take place in Catholic health care institutions—as "services," since none of those actions cure a disease or palliate its effects. What are forbidden in Catholic health care institutions are not "services" and sound health care practices but rather violations of human dignity and integrity.

Question 2. Does the Catholic appeal to the natural law confuse morality with biology?

Reply: A distinction has to be made between the natural moral law and the laws of nature or biological laws. Biological laws, or the laws of nature, are merely descriptive, describing what takes place repeatedly. The natural moral law is prescriptive, either directing us to choose behaviors that lead to integral human fulfillment and flourishing or forbidding those actions that hinder or impede human fulfillment. Since a law is by definition an ordinance of the intellect directive of behavior for free agents, the laws of nature are "laws" only in an analogous sense. They appear to direct behavior while in fact they merely describe what happens biologically.

Question 3. What is the relation between the laws of nature and the natural moral law then?

Reply: We must understand that what we are in our totality as human beings includes our "bodiliness," or physiology. Our bodies have natural drives or appetites directed to ends, the realization of which contributes to our fulfillment. We can understand the goal, or purpose, of our appetite for food and drink, for example: we understand that it must indulged in such a way so as to attain its proper goal—our physical and mental health. The same would be true of our sexual appetite. We can and should understand our biological and physiological drives and to what they are ordered so that we make reasonable choices in responding to them.

Question 4. Doesn't Christian morality deny or frustrate our natural appetites?

Reply: "Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. … All of the virtues are at the service of this response of love. If this invitation does not radiate forcefully and attractively, the edifice of the Church's moral teaching risks becoming a house of cards, and this is our greatest risk. It would mean that it is not the Gospel which is being preached, but certain doctrinal or moral points based on specific ideological options." — Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (November 24, 2013), n. 39

❖ Resources ❖

Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (November 24, 2013), Vatican website.

John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), Vatican website.

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